

Abraham Lincoln

His Greatest Quality

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With malice toward none, and charity for all

Lincoln's Greatest Quality

By FREDERICK SCOTT MILLER

Amid the throes of the great Civil War a party of clergymen begged Lincoln to do something vastly important enough, in their eyes, to warrant straining the point of honesty and common sense. In order to make the worse appear the better reason the spokesman of the delegation was as didactical and loud as he might have been in his own pulpit. In the midst of his harangue — "If you call a sheep's tail a leg, how many legs will it have?" Lincoln asked him mildly.

The orator reined up his eloquence: "Five!" he shouted hotly, exasperated at such interrupting levity on the part of the nation's chief executive.

"No, four," corrected Lincoln; "calling the tail a leg wouldn't make it one."


His sense of humor was Abraham Lincoln's greatest quality; for humor is the ability to justly recognize values; which means that you are not to be fooled or frightened in this vale of illusions that continually impose themselves to push us from our stools. *Raw-head-and-bloody-bones* Superstition, and smug Conventionality, and self-complacent-in-hypocrisy Respectability, shrivel at the touchstone of humor; and what a relief and a saving come from this fine ability to turn a robustious calamity inside out and view the puppets dallying!


It was Lincoln's fate to be surrounded, at his time of greatest trial, by men—able and sincere, who yet lacked this quality to lift them into greatness. Hence his towering superiority. Amidst the tremendous responsibilities pressing upon them all he alone was able, at a touch, to relieve the tensest situations, to restrain the over-zealous or quell the timidly cruel: all because it reminded him of a little story! After hearing which they went forth to their several tasks chagrined perhaps, but sane and smiling.

Hence Lincoln's hold upon the masses. When in his great addresses he had formulated their ideas for them and made things plain, he clinched the thought with an instance marvellously apt—the seal upon the writ. And to fix an incident exactly to the point requires as high an ability as that which makes a symphony or a poem.

Such works endure; "for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." Some years have rolled away, and already the War of the Rebellion has dwindled. The thunder of its captains and its shouting mean little to our generation, dazed but now by an uproar vast and hideous. The issues of its time are dead issues; its heroism inspires only a duteous admiration. But Lincoln's stories are fresh and virile, they lift and light up, they lead us out upon a hill.


And all because they grip us with the personality of

this sad humorist of the Sangamon. Personality is everything. John knew this and wrote it down: The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. The Gospels are the effulgence of the Man of Galilee; great events are such only in the reflected light of great personalities. History is the proper grouping of facts about the lives of these representative men; the epoch crystallizes into the epic when their deeds are significantly sung. Rightly taken their "lightest word" falls with the authority of an apparition. 

Lincoln's stories illumine a period when the American character, racked and writhing, revealed its inmost soul; and by him in fuller measure than by his contemporaries were the issues of that time recognized and reconciled. When the fissures opened and the swirling masses ground and crashed on one another he held his balance true. He was the spontaneously accredited representative of the North; and he knew the South, and so he was the South's best friend. 

After Appomattox he said this to a fiery young Republican: "Harlan was up here yesterday and he made a speech. He got the crowd pretty well warmed up, and then he shouted 'Now what'll we do with the rebels?' 'Hang 'em!' yelled someone; but my little son Tad was there, and he piped out quick 'No, hang onto 'em!' That brought down the house; and I say to you, young man, we'll just have to hang onto 'em!'"

Lincoln was called Our Martyr President, but that was a fool phrase, the blind and hasty outcry of men startled out of their self-possession and frightened to revenge. It was applied, as well, to Garfield and McKinley; and for a little moment it served to set the three in equal rank before the minds of their countrymen. Such is the power of a phrase, and such may be the insane consequence of the inability to properly recognize values. Action is equal to reaction: the assassin and the community he outrages are alike sublimely ridiculous.

Booth yelled *Sic semper tyrannis!* but he should have cried, like Pilate, *Ecce homo!* Behold the man — THE MAN REPRESENTATIVE — embodier and sustainer of a priceless hope and faith of other men, in his portentous passing! Lincoln's place is with the Saviours of the world; not among the sincere who died from blind prejudice or insane caprice. The signs proclaimed him; what was dim descried has been made plain. North and South stood still and gazed on one another at the sound of the pistol shot — for the veil between them had been rent in twain from the top to the bottom!  But, more than his death, Lincoln's own utterances proclaim his station and degree; for all his great addresses may be resolved into the Wonderful Words: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. 